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Pentecost (John 7. 37-52)

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The Holy Spirit is sometimes called the 'shy person' of the Trinity. And this is somewhat ironic since, according to the biblical witness, a notable feature of the presence of the Spirit in people's lives is boldness of speech and daring in action. The Spirit may be difficult to *see* directly, as an object of our perception – and hence 'shy'. But the *experience* of the Spirit is of being empowered directly by the life of God, being released more fully into the world rather than retiring into safe seclusion.

The Scriptures attest, it seems, to an evolving understanding of how the power of the Spirit affects our lives. In the Old Testament, the spirit seems at times almost like a commodity, a 'thing' which can be bestowed upon, removed from and shifted between people – a bit like a new battery pack. It's something external to the life of those on whom it rests, given by God to a new king or a prophet for the exercise of a particular task at a particular time.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit experienced by Jesus' disciples at Pentecost is recognisably continuous with this Old Testament testimony, empowering prophetic utterance and visions, manifesting God's presence among his people. The disciples receive something that they do not generate, and do not control. And yet, there is something that feels different here. It's not just that they are given something to say through some external hard-drive, acting as mouthpieces for God's words. It is that they are becoming *people* with something to say, people who are being transformed from the inside so as to witness with their whole selves to God's presence and life. Their prophetic voice comes out of who they are becoming.

Pentecost is often called 'the birthday of the church'. According to the Acts of the Apostles, the Spirit of God, the energy of God's own life, is poured out on those

who have been led by Jesus to face up to their own woundedness and fear, and who have seen the godlessness and violence at the heart of their religious system of goodness. In the light of this disillusionment – both personal and corporate – the disciples are at last in the place of being open to receive what they cannot generate for themselves, ‘living water’. They are in the place of letting go self-sufficiency and institutional self-protection so as to receive the living God. They have nothing left to lose and so nothing to fear. They are freed to speak the truth, and they are inspired to offer their lives as Jesus did, for the healing and liberation of all: ‘Never has anyone spoken like this’.

And I have been wondering what this means for us and for our church today. The Spirit, of course, is not confined to the church – interesting how the religious folk are always attempting to corral it. The chief priests and Pharisees deny by definition that Jesus can be speaking God’s word: ‘Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee’. But we don’t control the manifestation of God’s Spirit! Nevertheless, the church *is* called, *we* are called, to be together a sacrament of God’s presence, a sign of and witness to the new reality already breaking in upon the world, an agent and catalyst of the new creation, responsive to the movement and call of this Pentecostal wind.

So what might this feast of Pentecost mean for us?

Among us at Benedictus, I see signs of the new creation dawning as we nurture an inclusive community and seek to love one another, as we live out our vocations as teachers, students, parents, researchers, policy makers, carers, and in many other ways, and as we learn how to listen more deeply to God’s call on our lives and engage with our own woundedness and need. The work of the Spirit in the world is often a hidden and unspectacular affair (that ‘shy’ Spirit again) – through us and our daily faithfulness she leavens the dough, growing like a mustard seed ‘how we do not know’, until one day that seed becomes a tree where the birds of the air

make their nests. In such ways, this community is living already in the Spirit as an agent and catalyst of the new creation.

Yet, with great caution and tentativeness, I find myself also wondering about the prophetic dimension of the Pentecostal wind, and the boldness of speech that characterised Jesus and the early church, living as they did on the other side of fear and death. We are right to be tentative about this, I think. False prophets abound and too often, without proper discernment, the Spirit is invoked to justify the loud and unredeemed opinions of individuals claiming to have a hotline to God, and imposing their views on the world.

Even so, the new reality made visible and habitable by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a public and political matter, with profound consequences for our common life. Proclaiming this new reality doesn't mean shouting at people - conversation, dialogue and listening are the necessary shape of our engagement with the world – but I believe that engage we must.

You don't need me to tell you of some of the issues which face us. *The Sydney Morning Herald* on Friday reported that, as a direct result of the recent budget, 'more than half a million young people could need emergency assistance - including food packages', given policy changes that 'welfare groups [including Anglicare and the Brotherhood of St Lawrence] have warned will lead to "catastrophe"'. According to evidence given at Senate committee hearings, the mandatory six-month wait for benefits for those under 30 is likely 'to push hundreds of thousands of people into crisis'.¹ Earlier in the week we heard of the financial unaccountability and profiteering of the contractors running Australia's off-shore detention centres, and the loopholes in the tax system which continue to allow the richest Australians to avoid paying their fair share. And that's before we get to the environmental catastrophe already beginning to engulf some of the poorest people on earth. How

¹ <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/welfare-groups-warn-changes-will-spark-catastrophe-20140605-39lzi.html#ixzz33powlmkK>

strongly are our churches and our church leaders speaking about any of this? And what might be our role in encouraging and facilitating this truth-telling?

Of course, many of the issues that confront us are complex and it is perfectly possible that Christians may disagree about how to respond. But this complexity is not an excuse to avoid engagement and the risk of speech – for this is God’s world and these are God’s people, and we are all members of systems that exclude and oppress and deny the truth.

So how are we to speak? With whom? What do we have to offer and to learn together for the healing of the world? What is the prophetic role of a people who have no territory to defend and nothing left to lose, and who share in God’s passionate love poured out for the world? What does Pentecost mean for us, now, as this people in this time and place?

I don’t have answers for all these questions, but I believe the Pentecostal wind of God blowing through my life, blowing through the life of this community gathered, calls us to open ourselves to their insistent ring. If out of the believer’s heart flows living water, then it must lead us to become, like Jesus, water for a thirsty world. May the Spirit inspire us in the weeks and months ahead to yield ourselves to these questions, to listen with our hearts and offer ourselves to be poured out in our turn for love and truth and justice.